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SUBJECT: THE FIGHT FOR THIRD PLACE IN CAMBODIA'S APRIL
COMMUNE ELECTIONS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Recent discussions with NGOs and political party members suggest that the real race for the April 1 commune council elections will be between FUNCINPEC and the NRP of Prince Norodom Ranariddh probably competing for third place. As the clear front-runner, the ruling CPP continues to dominate media coverage of the upcoming elections, and CPP officials are reportedly spending every weekend campaigning for CPP commune candidates, providing money and gifts to voters as well as ensuring that infrastructure needs of the community are addressed. The opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) is working on expanding its base of communes under SRP control, and hopes to come in a respectable second in the elections. Prince Ranariddh, however, is not expected to return to Cambodia in the near term due to pending lawsuits. The most interesting race is between FUNCINPEC (aligned with Hun Sen) and the new party formed by Prince Norodom Ranariddh following his ouster from FUNCINPEC. The fact that Ranariddh is not expected to return anytime soon may handicap that race. All parties agree that the April 1 results will set the stage for the 2008 election campaign. A UNDP election consultant's recent report details the shortcomings of the National Election Commission (NEC) and the electoral process in Cambodia. End Summary.

No Contest on April 1, Save for Third Place

¶2. (U) A series of meetings with Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP) and Sam Rainsy Party officials, members of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), and NGO representatives working on elections, revealed that the ruling CPP's hold on the majority of the nation's 1,621 communes will continue on April 1. On that date, the country will vote for the second time for commune council representatives. Commune councils are the lowest government body recognized by the Cambodian Constitution, with 11,261 seats for the country's 24 provinces. The CPP dominated the first commune council elections in 2002, winning a total of 7,695 seats and taking the commune chief position (i.e., dominating the vote in a commune) in 1,597 communes out of 1,621 total communes. FUNCINPEC came in second, with 2,211 seats and winning 10 communes. The SRP took third place, with 1,345 commune seats and a dominant position in 13 communes. (Note: These figures omit one commune in Banteay Meanchey province where the SRP victory was contested by the CPP, and an awkward power-sharing arrangement has remained in effect. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) This time, all non-CPP parties acknowledge that the CPP will win; the question is by how wide a margin. Even CPP stalwarts assess that vote buying may not be enough during upcoming elections; voters demand infrastructure projects, wells, and roads -- if they are not satisfied, the CPP runs the risk of people taking the money/gifts but voting for another party. One CPP central committee member

complained that he and other senior RGC officials have been spending each weekend since November 2006 in the provinces drumming up support for CPP candidates. This same member acknowledged that lower ranking CPP officials must deliver their districts in order to keep their jobs; this official said he will not lose his job but must develop an electoral constituency if he is to advance within the party. While he dislikes the required campaign work and the associated outlay of cash or projects he is required to supply, he knows that his future within the CPP depends on his electoral work. At the same time, he noted that it was good the CPP was not complacent about the elections; the party leadership is taking very seriously constituency concerns to ensure registered CPP voters turn out for the CPP on April 1. People within the party are asking questions of local authorities and expecting accountability, he added, which is making the CPP a more democratic party.

¶4. (SBU) SRP officials say that they are prepared for a CPP victory, but their aim is to expand the SRP's current base of control within the commune councils. In 2002, they won 13 communes, but in the national elections in 2003, the SRP won enough seats in the National Assembly to represent majority control in roughly 140 communes -- particularly those in urban areas. SRP Secretary General Mu Sochua said that the SRP's goal for the 2007 elections is to consolidate their hold on those communes, and possibly expand control to as many as 300 communes-- i.e., to double their base. The party has worked hard to identify the best candidates to run, and in some cases, they have dropped non-performing SRP commune council incumbents. Sochua described a situation in Poipet where their commune chief had grown unpopular, so the party polled local citizens who identified a local physician as the best candidate; the SRP enlisted him as their candidate. Sochua noted that the CPP does a similar exercise, but the

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ruling party only asks citizens to name the best candidate from a CPP-provided list; the SRP takes a more open-ended approach and tries to identify the person whose name appeals to the widest swath of voters. (Note: Separate conversations with CPP officials indicate that Mu Sochua's outline of CPP candidate selection procedures is accurate; one CPP Senator noted that CPP provincial leadership approves the final choices. End Note.) SRP also wants to take the deputy commune chief position in every commune where they do not come in first, in order to solidify their position as the leading second party in Cambodian politics.

¶5. (SBU) The NRP is confident they will take third place and embarrass FUNCINPEC and the CPP in the process. Even without Ranariddh's presence in Cambodia and no party organizational structure (two Ranariddh advisors noted that they have 35 people running the party and the rest are candidates and supporters at the grassroots level -- there is no provincial party structure in between), Ranariddh loyalists claim that the royalist voters associate NRP candidates with the royal family and former King Sihanouk's legacy -- and that is going to mean a third-place victory for the NRP, they say. Despite press reports to the contrary, Ranariddh's office in Phnom Penh says that negotiations between the CPP and Ranariddh that would eliminate the legal problems facing the Prince are continuing. The ability of the NRP to gather so many defectors from the ranks of FUNCINPEC commune councilors is proof that FUNCINPEC rank and file will not support FUNCINPEC at the polls and do not view FUNCINPEC as the standard bearer of the monarchy, say Ranariddh's people. The CPP's continual claim that FUNCINPEC will remain a coalition partner of the CPP in a future government also serves to discredit FUNCINPEC, as the voters see a vote for FUNCINPEC as a vote for the CPP -- so perceive that they might as well vote for the CPP, according to the NRP. In effect, the CPP is destroying FUNCINPEC, and will either try to cut a deal with Prince Ranariddh to keep the opposition split, or eliminate royal family members from participating in politics -- a topic that continues to be

raised by the CPP. In that event, say Ranariddh loyalists, the Prince will renounce his title, just as the former King did. NRP members point to their ability to register NRP party lists in the majority of communes in a relatively short period of time as an indication of the degree of NRP support among grassroots FUNCINPEC members.

COMFREL: Improvements Since 2002; Difficulties Remain

¶6. (SBU) In a meeting with Koul Panha, director of the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL), Panha described for Pol/Econ Chief the differences between the 2002 elections and the lead up to the April 1, 2007 elections. On a technical level, NEC has brought improvements to the electoral system, said Panha. Two SRP appointees have been added to the NEC and there was broader recruitment of Provincial Electoral Committee (PEC) and Commune Electoral Committee (CEC) members, said the COMFREL official. The number of registered voters increased and the NEC deserves credit for that, added Panha. The NEC remains a strongly partisan organization dominated by the CPP, as are the PECs and CECs where over 70 percent of the members are with the ruling party, but it's better than 2002, Panha allowed. Registration of party candidate lists has been smoother this time, Panha added, as the 2002 legal framework made it easy to reject lists of candidates over a single problem; that has been eliminated this time. The NEC has also dispensed with the "NGO Coordinating Committee," which Panha said was actually an impediment to NGO participation in the electoral process. Now, NGOs can work directly with the NEC and cooperation has improved, he said.

¶7. (SBU) The mechanism for resolving election-related complaints has not improved, however, affirmed Panha, and is obviously skewed against non-ruling parties. The NEC's plan for the provision of voter information slips was a good idea in theory, but the implementation through the largely CPP-affiliated village chiefs was a failure. During the 2002 and 2003 elections, added Panha, each party did its own voter information checks.

¶8. (SBU) There has been an overall improvement in the electoral environment with less overt violence so far, said Panha, but while physical attacks have decreased, other forms of intimidation have arisen. Family members are threatened with physical violence or loss of jobs if their relative/candidate is a threat to the CPP, said Panha, who provided an example of a female SRP candidate whose husband was told he would lose his military position if he could not

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convince his spouse to withdraw. Vote buying and gift giving by the CPP has increased this time, said Panha. Another negative factor that has not changed since 2002 is the lack of media access accorded to non-CPP candidates. Although the official campaign period is only 15 days before the elections, already the radio and television programs are promoting CPP candidates while other parties are denied access, according to COMFREL.

UNDP Report Cites Shortcomings, Areas for Improvement

¶9. (SBU) A UNDP consultant recently completed an assessment of Cambodia's electoral system and made a number of recommendations to address inherent problems in the conduct of elections. The report identifies the NEC's affiliation with the Ministry of Interior as problematic, and notes that the body's independence remains in question. The report also cited many of the shortcomings noted by COMFREL and other NGOs; namely, the lack of a neutral electoral dispute resolution body, the media dominance by the CPP, and the overly complex and detailed regulations governing elections (while even the most basic application of election laws is not done equitably), lack of oversight of campaign finances,

and a number of other points. In a meeting with Pol/Econ Chief, the consultant noted that while Cambodia's elections may be technically adequate, they fall short of achieving their Constitutional mandate of promoting true political pluralism by virtue of the weaknesses outlined in the report.

He urged that future donor funding go towards rectifying the inequities in the electoral system as a whole, and not focus on the technical aspect of the elections.

USG Assistance to Elections

¶10. (U) USAID is supporting the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and election monitoring NGOs COMFREL, NICFEC, and the Youth Council of Cambodia (YCC) in a variety of activities surrounding the elections on April 1. NDI will print 45,000 copies of an election day manual for polling agents; NDI also trained 240 political party representatives from the CPP, SRP, FUNCINPEC, NRP to act as party monitoring trainers for their respective parties; NDI will assist local NGOs develop voter guides highlighting party issues; NDI will organize 30 candidate debates in 10 provinces that will be broadcast on Radio Free Asia; NDI has trained 36 female representatives (12 each) from the CPP, SRP, and FUNCINPEC to improve the communication skills of women candidates. COMFREL and NICFEC have worked with field monitors in election coverage both before and after election day, and NICFEC has produced 120 commune-based theater performances to educate the populace on good governance and women as leaders.

USAID has funded the International Republican Institute (IRI) to work with the YCC to encourage youth as poll monitors.

Teachers as Electoral Workers

¶11. (U) USAID has noted that during a January 2007 Education Joint Technical Working Group meeting of donors highlighted UNESCO concerns that teachers had been recruited as Commune and Provincial electoral officials for the CECs and PECs. NEC policy states that only non-teaching education staff may perform election-related functions, but reportedly many teachers (who make an average of USD 30 per month) are attracted to the higher salaries -- USD 80 for CECs and USD 200 for PECs. USAID education partners report noticeable absences among teaching staff, and in Mondulkiri province, roughly 30 percent of teachers are allegedly working as electoral officials in some capacity. During a recent USAID field visit to Kratie province where USG personnel met with five local election officials, three of the five were school officials who planned to be absent from their educational duties for three months.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Some donors have evinced little interest in the commune elections, characterizing them as "unimportant." However, commune councilors select the members of the Senate as well as the village chiefs, so have a stronger political role beyond the local level. While it may be tempting to overlook Cambodia's upcoming commune council elections as a foregone conclusion before they are even held, no one party appears to be taking the outcome for granted and all are continuing to jockey to improve their positions. The CPP is

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not giving into complacency but is looking to its candidates to appeal to constituencies based on performance and services delivered -- and is not relying on the standard gifts of 5,000 riel (\$1.25) or a bag of sugar. The SRP is being realistic and trying to secure the uncontested second position; the NRP looks to come in a respectable third and most observers (even some FUNCINPEC members) agree that is likely. What everyone does agree on is that the April 1 results will be the starting point for the 2008 national

election campaign -- which is why human rights leader Kem Sokha is waiting quietly to see how the parties fare before making his decision whether to form a party to contest the national elections next year. End Comment.

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